

## **Black Hawk: An Autobiography and Its Influence on Native American Equality**

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In the quote, “We will forget what has past—and may the watchword between the Americans and Saukenuks ever be—‘friendship’”, Black Hawk reflected on his autobiography’s impact on the relationship between the Native Americans and the American settlers. Throughout the early 1800s, the American settlers continued moving westward, often coming into conflict with Native Americans. The American government manipulated many Illinois Native American tribes and took control of their land. The Saukenuk, a Native American tribe in Illinois, was one of the first to resent American conquest. Consequently, the Saukenuk chief, Black Hawk, wrote an autobiography expressing his opinions concerning the need for positive interaction between the Native Americans and the settlers. Because of Black Hawk’s publication Black Hawk: An Autobiography, readers understand Native American rights and cultural development throughout the 1830s in northern Illinois.

Black Hawk was born in 1767 into the Saukenuk tribe, a large Native American group located where the Rock River joins the Mississippi, at the current city of Rock Island. At age fifteen, Black Hawk became chief of the Saukenuk tribe. Although chieftdom was a big burden, Black Hawk excelled in his duties. He gained experience in matters of tribal welfare and began to learn concepts of defense and provision of basic needs. Black Hawk realized the importance of qualities such as love and caring that ensured that trust was gained and unity was secured within the tribe. Although his tribe was not immediately affected by the settlers, they eventually forced the Saukenuk to sign

a treaty granting them all of the Saukenuk land. The sale of land was incomprehensible to Black Hawk, and he regretfully expressed, “Nothing can be sold, but such things can be carried away.” Aware of the consequences if they did not cooperate, Black Hawk surrendered and paid the settlers. His leadership and deep understanding of the situation and the realization that war was a dangerous possibility kept the Saukenuk group united. His only nonviolent option was to present his ideas to the American settlers in literary form and warn the Americans of their cruel intentions. He wrote about the Saukenuk culture, including their customs, traditions, and rights. Black Hawk understood that, although the two cultures could not be mixed, they had to try to work together to form a better state. Black Hawk was determined to insert a Native American viewpoint into the thinking of the Illinois government during a time when Native Americans were thought insignificant. Black Hawk’s constant perseverance to introduce Native American rights led to the publication of his autobiography in 1834, penetrating the prejudiced views of the American settlers.

Black Hawk’s writing style contributed in a big way to the success of his book. By using common dialect of the settlers and Saukenuk words and phrases, Black Hawk created a satisfying mix of the two cultures. This allowed the Americans to comprehend his ideas while simultaneously receiving the Native American culture that was included. In the original title, Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak: The Life of Black Hawk, the cultural tie was present through the two languages within the title. The American terms in the book, including words such as “Sacs,” “Saukies,” “Socks,” and “Sakis,” demonstrated the settlers’ language when referring to the Saukenuk tribe. To provide Native American flavor, Black Hawk included his personal views and linguistic characteristics. He

regarded American women as “squaws” and journalists as “village criers,” as well as referenced cities as “big villages” and alcohol as “bad medicine”. Black Hawk’s cultural descriptiveness of the situation coaxed readers to understand his viewpoint. Furthermore, Black Hawk’s decision to present his thoughts in writing portrayed him to be logical and unafraid of negotiation. Black Hawk’s attributes initiated reliance between his tribe and the Illinois citizens that allowed them to understand Black Hawk’s point of view, increasing the collaboration with Native Americans in Illinois.

Readers’ reacted more favorably to Native American rights than before Black Hawk published his book. Black Hawk: An Autobiography remains one of the most accurate and complete records historians have on Native American and American settler interaction. What surprised the authorities and his audience most definitely was Black Hawk’s ability to challenge the Illinois government, speaking for the entire Native American population. Black Hawk allowed citizens to see that his life was not that of a savage; instead, he was more comparable to a hero. Black Hawk succeeded in strengthening the Saukenuks and, with his tribe’s support, changed the attitude of Illinois settlers. Apathy was replaced with respect and sympathy that allowed Americans to modify the future of Illinois by recognizing Native American influence. Native American rights were finally being considered a critical element in Illinois. Alongside this came an unexpected wave of publicity for Black Hawk. He was invited to several banquets as a guest of honor, and gifts were given to show appreciation for alerting the public of their errors. Black Hawk had saved Illinois from becoming an area of war and chaos, and instead he created a region of peace and equality.

During the 1830s in northern Illinois, Black Hawk published Black Hawk: An Autobiography, which encouraged readers understand the need for Native American equality and cultural understanding. Within a short time, his book became one of the most controversial and view-changing pieces of literary works in Illinois. Because of Black Hawk's autobiography, the government began to allow Native American input in laws and regulations. To this day, Black Hawk: An Autobiography is one of the most debated and revered materials in Illinois history. As Black Hawk said, and spent his whole life proving, "We can only judge what is proper and right by our own standards." By merging the beliefs and perspectives of the Native Americans and the American settlers, Black Hawk transformed Illinois history forever. [From Alliance Library System. "Black Hawk" <http://history.alliancelibrarysystem.com/illinoisalive/authors.cmf> (Sept. 1, 2005);. William Boelhower, "Saving Saukenuk: How Black Hawk Won the War and Opened the Way to Ethnic Semiotics," Journal of American Studies (Dec. 1991); Nancy Bonvillian, Black Hawk: Sac Rebel; Peter Inverson, "Black Hawk." Illinois State University <http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html.ah010300blackhawk.com> (Sept. 5, 2005); Mark Wallace, "Black Hawk's An Autobiography: The Production and Use of an "Indian" Voice." American Indian Quarterly (Fall 1994; Sarah Wesson, "A Biography of Black Hawk," Richardson-Slone Special Collections Center. [http://www.qcmemory.org/Qchistory/People/Black%20Hawk/black\\_\\_hawk.htm](http://www.qcmemory.org/Qchistory/People/Black%20Hawk/black__hawk.htm). (Sept. 8, 2005). ]